

Episode 168

An example of how much it costs to hire an architect with Allan Corfield

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/168

Intro: As much as ten percent of your overall construction cost could be spent on professional fees and a self-builder might ask why they should be parting with money if they can't see where it's going. In this episode we speak to architect Allan Corfield about how his fees are worked out and his belief that costs should be transparent and fixed. I started by asking Allan to tell me a little bit about his background.

Allan: Our whole principle and the whole reason for AC Architects is to try and help self builders. We don't usually refer to ourselves as an architecture practice. We're here to help educate and help homeowners deliver their one-off dream home. That's really where the passion is and we've grown and changed and evolved our service to suit that. And it's been over five years to get to that point where we know how we can help a certain type of client to get to their end result, which is their dream home.

Ben: It's really interesting that you're focussing on self builders, so I actually, this might already be going off track, but I want to know why? Why are you interested just in houses and self builders?

Allan: So my background before being made redundant was commercial. Actually in the defence sector. And I really didn't enjoy it. And I got a chance to do a couple of different one-off houses and extensions, and working with the private individual, specifically on houses, is a much more enjoyable process. So that's selfishly what I want to be doing. And it's a business, I enjoy it but it's a big part of my life so I have to enjoy it.

So that was part of the reason when I was made redundant to set up a business to do one-off houses, and two or three years into having the business the self build was becoming a bigger thing. It was becoming more accessible for everybody. Programmes like Grand Designs, Building the Dream and magazines like

Homebuilding & Renovating, were paving the way and making it more accessible for people to build their own home.

And I saw an opportunity. There's not many architecture practices focussed on certain areas and trying to focus on a niche. And I saw that it was going to becoming a bigger part of housing in the UK and set things up around that.

Ben: When did you get going and how have you grown?

Allan: So 2009 I was made redundant. Thought, as many architects did, I was above recessions and was living the dream, and 20 of us were made redundant at the same time and there wasn't a job for an architect in Europe for two years. So I swallowed my pride and took a part-time job at night working in a call centre and set the business up during the day.

It took a couple of years to get going. We got a couple of good opportunities for one-off houses and from that point on seized on an opportunity to work with a company called SIPS Industries, building Structurally Insulated Panel houses. Got a partnership working with them and grew and grew.

In 2012 I think took on our first couple of staff members. That was a big realisation that it could actually be a business. And from that point grew. Did a couple of really nice houses and grew to we're now at 12. So last week we appointed a new Chartered Architect and a new Passivhaus Designer, which is another area that we want to get into. Searched out a really good candidate and got him to come and join us. So that's where the practice has grown to. We're on project 250. Over the last two years we've started getting a lot of work down south, which is good, which is interesting. It's grown from strength to strength.

Ben: From one business owner to another, well done. I know these challenges. It might sound simple to someone who doesn't run a business, take on a few staff it's alright. I know what that must mean and a lot of respect to you to keep everything pedalling, keep it moving forwards.

Allan: It's tough. People don't see that, the 15 hour days. The not seeing your wife and your friends. They just see the nice lifestyle and the occasional social media posts on holiday! They don't really see the overdraft and the borrowings and the yeah I need to make X amount to pay the bills at the end of the month, let alone pay myself. It's been a struggle but I've had some good people

supporting me and helping me and guiding me. And it is, touch wood, it's all going in the right direction. And it's actually a functioning business which architects are notoriously bad at.

Ben: Yes, that could be a whole other story. One thing that I'm quite interested about is that this geographic area, you're obviously not shy to saying no, I'm going to travel. I'm going to take business. Where do you draw that line and why are you operating within that line?

Allan: Anywhere in mainland UK. Sorry, I'll qualify that. We've now started, we've got out first couple of jobs in the Isles in Scotland in the west coast, so that's another challenge.

The way that we work, we work in a 3-D rendering package called ARCHICAD, so we can send out our drawing package to your iPad or to whatever it happens to be, and you can walk around your house. So you don't have to be there all the time. But with transport now with how easy and accessible it is, I can be in Penzance at 11:00, have two or three, four hours with a client and then get a flight home.

And all of our staff are used to that. We schedule our meetings. We are very well planned about it. And we factor into each fee proposal two or three visits, face to face visits, during each stage. And that's costed, and that's fine. But we can do so much remotely.

So to answer the question, there isn't really a line, a geographic line. We'll work wherever we need to. And what we often find is we'll do one job in Chelmsford for instance, and then we'll do two or three because they then talk to their friends. The builder actually likes working with us. And it's getting a lot easier to work remotely and work throughout the UK. I don't see it as a barrier. If you're good enough you can work anywhere.

Ben: And this brings us on to something that I think you do differently and is a very interesting thing that you do. And that's actually on your website, breaking it down as to the services that you provide and what it costs. And I said this to you that I understand if you don't want to talk about this, but I just find it really interesting that you've a) set a price and you've put it out there. So that's what I'd like to go through today if you're alright with that?

Allan: Yeah, happy to.

Ben: Okay, when people come to you, are they coming via the website so that they've actually taken in a lot of this information first?

Allan: Yeah. The majority are either coming in through companies that we've worked with, so building companies that recommend us and they usually talk through the way that we work anyway. Or it's coming through social media or the website. And then we find that either if they've read our ebook or if they've gone through a couple of pages on our website, there's enough information there that they know what sort of service we're going to provide and how we do it slightly differently than most, the majority of architects in the UK actually.

And doing that helps to pre-qualify the customer and it helps, they're a lot better educated and aware of what's going to happen because the majority of our people have never built a house before. They've never done this, it's a huge challenge and thing that they're going to commit to and the majority of them have never worked with an architect, so they don't know what an architect can provide.

And we set it out the way we do partly because the practice hours and the majority of traditional architecture practices in the UK work on a percentage cost, so they will charge you between 7 and 10% of the construction cost for their service. The big issue that I have with that is in self build it's all about the majority of the big things, and you'll appreciate this yourself with what you're doing, is that you have a set budget. And if you do not know what your architect's fee is going to be because it's a percentage of the construction cost, you can't plan ahead.

And also the other big thing is there's no incentive for an architect who's on a percentage of the construction cost, to save you any money, because their fee will be reduced by that. I may not win any friends in the architecture community but I'm not really fussed about that!

Ben: You've split it out into various different stages and I think first what I would like to know is how similar is this to what RIBA provide? Because I did find that useful in terms of comparison, if you're trying to compare this architect to that architect, those stages were very handy. So as I'm looking at this, knowing that I've already hired my architect, I can see some of this and think ah yes, the planning submission. But have you tried to simplify it or what have you done? Feel free to dive into these stages at any point.

Allan: Yes, that's fine. The RIBA Plan of Works is a great backstop and it does as you say, it's really good for comparing other practices and other fee proposals as like for like. But to me it's set up predominantly for commercial jobs. Larger commercial jobs. We used it when we started. Sorry, I used it when I started because we weren't a 'we' at that point. After a couple of projects I realised that the self builder and the private client is different.

So I thought well what are the actual deliverables. What are you really interested in. You're not interested in all these different processes. You want to get a design that you love, so that's our initial design stage.

So we go through lots of different processes and we will get you initial design. We usually give a couple of options for a client, taken from your project brief which is by far the most important thing that you can actually get right. You need to think about why you're doing this and what needs to go into it.

Something that we also try and do at the very start that sets us aside, and every other architect should really do and client should do, is getting the potential client to think about how they're going to use their buildings, so user scenarios. Rather than just I need five bedrooms and a bathroom, how do they actually use the building. So an example that we use is that they're an outdoors family so they want to be able to drive in with bikes on the roof, get the kids out, the dog's messy so they need to go into a wet room that's attached to the garage. They clean themselves all down before they go into the kitchen. Little things like that that actually make it a home rather than a house. So getting that bit right at the start is hugely important.

And then from that we would come up with a couple of different options. And what usually happens is we'll present two variations on a theme. Then inherently the client will like the master bedroom layout in one and the kitchen/dining layout in the other. So that becomes a third option. And then that's revised a couple of times until the client's happy.

We're still, although we do this slightly differently, we're still a chartered practice so we have to ask after every stage, are you happy to go ahead with the next stage. So actually when somebody agrees to a fee proposal with us they're only really agreeing to the first stage, because if they're not happy we don't proceed.

Ben: That's a good idea. I like that. I haven't actually heard of it put like that but that is a good idea.

Allan: And it gives certainty. I mean it's a nightmare for us as a business, so when you're trying to plan that you've got a fee proposal of X amount, but actually you've only really secured the first part of it.

But self building and building a house, as you know, there's lots of hurdles, there's stumbling blocks, there's challenges. And you may run out of money, or there may be a change in family circumstances that you can't commit and finish it. So actually having the security that you can just stop is great.

Ben: So I've just flicked down to the prices and you've pitched that at £5,000 excluding VAT, or 25% of the total fee. Now I appreciate there are a few things here that this is just an indication that you've put on your website and it's an example, but I think it's really helpful. So you've budgeted approximately £250,000, that's the project that we're working on and that's how all of these will fit in there. So you've gone for two routes. You've gone for £5,000 versus a 25% of total fee. Do you find that most people go for the fixed option?

Allan: The only reason I put the percentage as an 'or' is so that you can work out, actually if your budget's going to be £300,000 or £500,000 that you can work out what the stages are going to be. We don't offer as a percentage. It's a fixed cost so I have to get the right information out of the client at the project brief stage for me to be able to work out the fee proposal. Because we don't come back and ask for any more money. If we get the fee proposal, if we estimate the time wrong, then that's our mistake.

But you need to give the self builder security on what actually their end budget is going to be because professional fees will probably equate to 9/10% of the overall construction cost, regardless of what way it is delivered it's still going to be when you take in architects, engineers, surveys, the actual professional fees for planning applications and building control. It's still a significant amount of your budget. So you really want to know that before you start.

Ben: I think what I found was it was quite difficult to compare, because as you say, some people were working with percentages, we didn't know this whole system, or exactly the build route, that's the other thing, that are you going to end up building it yourself with your hands, are you going to hire someone in. All of these are a bit flexible which is why I quite like that idea of saying look we're just

going to design the house. And you've also got on here, estimated time two to three weeks to complete drawings. Is that the first set of drawings?

Allan: It's a difficult one. So that would be for... so if somebody says yes, we're ready to go, we take two to three weeks of our drawing time to come up with the two options. Bear in mind that this is based on us providing a full 3-D model, walk-throughs and things. The cost is very different if we're just providing a set of basic 2-D drawings.

So if somebody comes in and has £100,000 to spend, our fee is we will limit actually what they need and what they can afford, because they don't need it and then the fee is a lot less comparatively.

So the amounts that we've based on these cost comparisons are the sort of all-singing, all-dancing service. So everything that you would want and desire in an architectural service.

But yeah, the two to three weeks is our sort of estimation on our drawing time. Going back and forward and then us revising.

It depends on the client and how well we have interpreted their design and their requirements. We use Pinterest really heavily now with clients to gauge what they like aesthetically and that's been a big change for us in actually being able to get it right first time. It's huge and clients just love it. And we always try and get our clients to do lots of different boards but also a dislike board. What do I really not like. A key thing is husband and wife actually talking about these, because that's always an interesting one when you design something and one person's done the Pinterest board and the other one actually hates it! So that's happened a couple of times!

Ben: I was going to pat myself on the back there for saying yes, we've done Pinterest. But we've done exactly what you said that Kay has put the Pinterest board together and I've gone well okay. But we're also in a slightly interesting situation that Kay is, she wants a house with a particular feel and I am really the one that's sort of pushed in oh I want to build my own house. So I feel that there's give and take in this and that's another conversation that's very important working together and I've no idea what the full solutions are.

Allan: You have to work together. It's the same as anything. You have to pick your battles!

Ben: Planning though is something that I'm virtually at this stage now, where it does link to that first stage though doesn't it? Because you can't just go crazy. So how do you work between this Stage 2 Planning Submission versus Stage 1? Is there any element of planning in the first bit?

Allan: Yeah. It really depends if there is a contentious element with planning, so if it's housing in the countryside, or if it's a greenbelt or if it's on a flood plain, or anything that can be difficult, we would always get a pre-application enquiry dealt with or get a planning consultant in if there is contentious elements. And we would do that at the first design stage.

Something also that we also do now at that first stage is a cost check. And part of what you picked up on and you wanting to build it yourself, that decision has to be made quite early on because it really effects your budget in a huge way what you've got to spend. Therefore how big the house is going to be.

So we look at a cost check at the very first stage now as well and just make sure that you're comfortable with how much work you're going to do, where you're going to buy things, because the self builder can save so much money by non-traditional means of procurement. But you need to know that from day one and there's no point being happy with a design that you can't afford.

But yeah, so planning there is cross over between Stage 1 and Stage 2, but say if it is a replacement dwelling or if it's somewhere within a settlement boundary that actually you're not going to have a planning issue, a lot of people will just progress straight on to getting the design right and then submitting the planning.

So as I say, I would always suggest if there's any issues or any contentiousness I would go for a pre-application enquiry.

Ben: Your planning submission, maybe you could explain how much work is involved for you and how you get people through this stage and what it costs and so forth.

Allan: There's a lot of work. We always try and, we're very good I think at getting a lot more of our clients' desires through the planning process than other practices because we give really good rendered images. We spend a lot of time working on site lines and the streetscapes, or how it fits in to an existing street.

Certainly in England the key thing is the Design and Access Statement. It's not so much in Scotland but in England actually a really good Design and Access statement, it takes you through the whole process. The why the design is the way it is, the ethos, the design evolution, how you access the site and the planning policy. There's a lot of work goes into that and we can usually get more of the clients' desires through because of the strength of the information.

So it's always better to pay for a good service and the right amount of work, rather than just getting it through. Out of I think 240 projects we've only not got planning on two. And we knew they were complete chancing. I mean the clients knew straight away as well that they weren't going to get it but it was worth a punt shall we say. So we've got a really good success rate on that.

There's a lot of work and again what we try and factor in is that we don't know how much time the planning officer is going to need or if there's going to be lots of site visits or if they're going to ask for supporting information or loads of different things. So we try and account for that at the start but there is a lot of work. A lot of work involved in there.

Ben: So Stage 2 on your current costs on this example, £4,000 excluding VAT, or 20% of this total fee. And that, I think while we're on this point I wouldn't mind asking you how do you find the planning system from place to place? Because you do sometimes find the architects have a bit of a relationship with certain people, and you're working everywhere, but then that said you've told me that actually you feel that you've got a good way of progressing ideas.

Allan: So this is something that we, this is one of the barriers that we come up against, certainly in a practice in trying to get work in an area that we're not from.

Historically there was the sense of the architect could go and take the planner out for lunch and go and meet them and just call up the phone and make a couple of calls and could get things through, but those days are well and truly gone.

As long as we've done the right homework, we know the planning policy for the area. We'll speak to the planners. A lot with planning is about getting the planner on side and also getting your future neighbours on side as well. What some people will do is they'll just design the house and they'll submit it to planning without any discussions with them. You want the planners to feel like they're a

part of the decision process and a part of the design process and also your neighbours that may object. Take your drawings round before you submit with a bottle of wine, some chocolates and go round and just sit and explain why you're wanting to do it, why you've designed things and have room to move, change things if you need to. But make them feel like they're part of the process.

So I think historically having a local architect would have helped but to my mind I don't think we've, well I think our success rate speaks for itself. We've 60-70% of our work at the moment is in Birmingham South, so a lot of these are new planning districts or parishes every time so we get through it and we speak to the right people and follow a process and supply the right information that actually it doesn't matter where we are or where we come from. If you know the regulations and why you're going to get something through planning, you shouldn't have an issue.

But again the key in planning is getting your neighbours and also getting the planners on side.

And a lot of people don't know your neighbours can also, when you've got your neighbour notification period, certainly people will object, but you can also get letters of support. So you actually ask the neighbours that are happy with what you're doing and get them to put a letter of support in. And they do count if say it has to go to planning committee, that is taken into account. So little things like that. But getting the planners on side and making them feel like they're part of the process is key.

Ben: Some really good tips in there. Appreciate that. Let's move on to Stage 3. Now I don't know too much about this, but I'm aware that if everything goes okay with our planning submission and appeasing the neighbours and so forth, we'll move on to Detailed Design Development. Now does this actually require a lot from the client at this stage?

Allan: So yes. So you'll be getting a question, or a list of things that you need to confirm: finishes, materials, heating strategy. Lots of different things need to be worked out at this stage.

So in England it's the Building Regs approval. In Scotland it's Building Control. And the two systems are different. Up here in Scotland we can only go through the local authority and you have to have everything confirmed and submitted at the same time, and then reviewed which takes about four weeks, and approved before you start on site.

So the benefit of the Scottish system is that everything is I think a lot more thought out before you start digging anything on site. As opposed to the English system where you can go to the local authority or a private certifier and you can put a notice to start work and then you can start work the next day, and then drip feed the information. So two completely different processes.

What we try and do is a mixture of both when we're working in England. We try and get everything confirmed and ready to submit, then submit it as a full package. A well thought out and detailed package, rather than drip feeding information, which to me is a lot better well thought out process.

Ben: Knowing where you're going up front. Sounds like a good idea!

Allan: Completely. Rather than making it up as you go along. But that's what happens. There's the self builder, you'll find this, there's a lot of hurdles and ups and downs. And things could take, as you know finding a plot of land could take two years. You could have issues with planning and it take a year or that whole process could take a year. When you actually get ready you just want to start. And actually stepping back and getting everything lined up and in right is the better way of doing it than rushing ahead. And if you do rush ahead it will always cost you more in the long run. So getting all that right.

So Building Regs / Building Warrant, is a compliance exercise. It's making sure that whatever you've designed complies with the current building regulations.

Ben: And how have you veered off from the RIBA stages? If it's too complex we'll leave it and move on.

Allan: You know what, I couldn't actually even recite them anymore. It's been that long since we've looked at them.

Ben: Good for you! Let's leave it.

Allan: Yeah, let's leave it at that. But I mean the end result is getting certification that you can actually legally start building. And I think key in this is construction method, it's materials, it's the heating strategy and how energy performing is the house going to be. So you've obviously made a decision that you're striving for Passive, which is brilliant, so you need to... a lot of these things need to be worked out, how am I going to get there, what is the minimum

heating source. So it's a very detailed driven and it's part architect and engineer but mostly the client needs to make decisions.

Ben: So on this you've costed it up in our example £6,000 excluding VAT, or 30% of the total fee. Anything else we need to know about this stage?

Allan: No. I'd say it's just make the decision, spend the time researching and getting things right at this stage. And get the SAP calculation, or the PHPP Passivhaus certification process that you'll go through, you have to work that out and go through what the strategy is. Because that affects hugely your budget but also your running costs for the rest of the house for the whole time you're in the house. So it's a very key stage but again it's another compliance tick box so that you can continue on.

Ben: Stage 4, Production Information.

Allan: Yes. So this is something that we have, so if you were doing a small extension, after building regs you've got enough information that you can go and build your extension. But if your building is anything more substantial you need to have a set of construction drawings that shows how you're going to build it.

So the building regs, stage 3, you'll only... everything will be detailed to a point. So there'll be an eaves detail, or window detail, there'll be a door opening detail. But it's only to get through the compliance exercise of building regs. It's not to actually be able to build it.

So if you were a self builder and you've never done this before you'll have the scenario on a wet Wednesday morning when you have a brickie saying how do I do this, or how do you want your eaves profile to match into the top of the wall head, and you'll go, err I don't know. But if you've got a set of construction drawings you'll have every detail worked out and you'll be able to just point and say well there's the drawings, build it to what my architect said. So that's hugely vital for a self builder to get it built the way you want it to be built.

And certainly for something if you are going low energy or fabric first approach, you need to have all the details worked out because it's not the way that the builder will normally have built. There'll be tape, there'll be sealant products that they've never seen or used before. There's lots of different, if these aren't shown on a drawing

they will just go off and do what they want, and therefore when you get your airtest result it won't be what you need.

Another big part of this production information stage, if you're going to go for something, an off-site construction method, whether it be SIPS or ICF or Val-U-Therm timber frame, any of these things that are part built in a factory, you will get given a set of drawings as the client that you have to review and you have to sign for. So you need to retain your architect to try and help you make sure that these are alright and that needs to liaise or be reviewed in line with the window and door schedule.

I don't know if you've got any of your window or door quotes yet, or seen a window and door quote, but each one of the window or door suppliers will have their own way of quoting. It'll be about 25/30 pages long and the first five pages is how you read the quote. And they're all different. And your window and door package may be £20,000. It's a big number that you're going to have to sign for and make sure that windows openings match the kit size. So you have to have all this information to hand.

And a lot of people when we do discussions and I do talks, they'll say well actually I could just save myself that £4,000 and not go for a construction set. If you imagine your window and door package is £25,000 and your kit is £90,000, £4,000 is a small price to pay to make sure that works.

So that would be my key take away on the construction package. Just pay a little bit to make sure that all of the big numbers work.

Ben: For me it's very important that I have a good experience on this project if I can make it happen at all, and so I don't intend to be doing very much if I can possibly help it. Obviously if I get very strapped for cash then I'll be out with a paintbrush and doing those last few bits!

Allan: I'm sure you'll want to do something.

Ben: I want to video it.

Allan: Video it. The good thing about pretty much 90% of our clients, and that's whether or not they're in professional services or they're a high flying lawyer, they'll all go out and tape their building. So they'll tape the joints of the internal face of the outside walls and they'll sit with their sticky tape because they know that taping all the joints will make their building airtight. And it's a great thing for you to do to

be part of the build process, but also it's a great workmanship check to see if everything is right. So I would suggest you do that. That would be a good thing. Sit with your sticky roll of tape and at night come home and do that.

Ben: Yeah, quite interesting. I know obviously depending on the building there can be a lot of it or not so much of it depending on the construction method if it's ICF or whatever. However you're right. Anything that you do on the project will, it will bring you more into that experience. I think what I'm concerned about is that I'd like to be able to do something else beyond this if it all goes okay and I think the more involved that I get into it, it might have the reverse effect. So stage one, just have an easy build. That's what I'm after!

Allan: Get the first one out of the way!

Ben: I'd be going for your Stage 5 as well, On-site Supervision. Why do we need it, is it the same in Scotland and England. Would we just trust the contractor? How many visits?

Allan: So is it the same in Scotland and England, I would say no. The benefit that you do have with the building regs process in England is that building control inspectors can and will be on site. And they actually, in my experience, really want to be there and they want to be involved.

In Scotland they're supposed to come and assess the work. Not help, but are supposed to come and assess the work. There's so little funding with the building control and planning departments that they don't have time to come out. So they're not involved so you've not got that process or that backstop of somebody coming to help you check things. So it is different Scotland to England.

Our on-site supervision, we try not being involved. So traditional architects will say right I need a retainer of £2,500 a month or £1,000 a month for a couple of visits. If you've done your job right you shouldn't need to be there. So if we've given you the information and you've hired competent contractors you shouldn't need it.

So the way that we usually work is we'll provide an ad-hoc service. We're always at the end of the phone and we do like to come down and be and see and photograph and be a part of the build so that's something, I'll shoot myself right in the foot here, but it's something that we usually tend to end up just doing for free and will try and link it up with another site visit or other client visit and will just pop

in. But we're at the end of the phone and we're not a practice that as soon as the phone rings we start our clock, like lawyers do. It's ad-hoc services are better on that.

The only different way that we would provide a requirement for a service is if we're providing a mortgage certificate. So if we're acting on behalf of the mortgage company providing an architect's certificate or a CML lenders certificate, to say at the end of this stage this work's done you can now give a tranche break paydown of £100,000 for the groundworks and the kit. So if we're certifying that we need to be there at each visit.

So it's something there is value in is having somebody or a professional or somebody outside coming in at handover, so at key stages. So groundworks to kit. Windows going in. Wind and watertight.

And then from that point in it's usually just trades doing their own thing. And that's the beauty of self build. You can get to the wind and watertight part and just get your local trades in. Even on a Passivhaus or a fabric first or low energy house. It's just normal stuff once you get inside the shell it's just an electrician coming in and doing his normal job. So I don't think your architect should be retained or need to be retained if they've done their job right.

Ben: Just going over the whole generic fee proposal that we're talking about today, in a four bedroom, two storey, say 200m² house, a budget of around £250,000, and as we tot up all of your fees it's just below £20,000.

Allan: Yes.

Ben: So what do you find, how much of your services do people use? How do you fare in the market? How do you actually set your costs?

Allan: So our costs are where they are now because we're getting a better name. We're doing more work and we've actually got better staff. We've got a better team, so we can charge the fee that we do because we actually deliver on what we need to.

But I cost check. At the end of a project the guys will record their hours and we will review what the time was spent on it, as any business should review what they've done, what their overheads, what their costs have been, and then will just review it and review it every quarter just to see if the fees are still right.

The fees will vary greatly on the client's budget and their requirements. We're doing one £2,000,000 self build at the moment and we're also doing three bedroom homes for £70,000. So our fee, we're happy to work on anything, if this is a project that we want to.

So the fee varies. The fee structure is dependent on each project and I would say the majority of people take the full service, right the way through. It works and we've not had, I've certainly not had anybody come back and say they've not felt value out of it. I've never had that. Granted when we come up against some of our competitors we are expensive, or we are slightly more expensive, but nobody has come back and actually at the end quibbled over the fee, which is nice.

But what I would say is we're still a lot more cost effective than a comparative practice down south. And we'll still factor in all of our travel costs and all these different things and still be a lot more cost effective to a good practice.

Ben: I think people should charge what they feel they want to charge. I don't have an issue with anyone charging ridiculous rates because maybe they'll just attract a different client and I think that's fantastic that you've been able to go through all of those today.

And do you find as well that clients quite like that? That they feel that they're not on an isolated, well I'm going to charge you this much. They can see what they're getting, and okay it might be on a sliding scale according to their budget.

Allan: Yeah, and one thing we're always very happy with, all of our clients, our future clients, speak to our current clients or our previous clients. So there's nothing hidden. They can go and look at our builds that are on site or speak to our previous clients and see was it value for money or was it too expensive. I mean we're very open about what we do and the people that we work with, unless obviously they want privacy.

The fixed fee is by far the best way to go. It has to be. And again if somebody's not willing to show you what their costs are on their website then they're hiding things. That would be my thought on it anyway.

Ben: One final question to you, and that is about just this area in general, that we're self builders, we're coming into this, we'd like to hire an

architect. We could go away and just do it all ourselves. Is there anything we should watch out for when we're coming and looking at costs?

Allan: Do you mean the cost of the overall project or the cost of the architecture side?

Ben: Well why would we pay more? Let's say it's exactly the same sort of build. What would make us choose someone who was three times the price you are, or three times less than you are? Do you see what I'm saying?

Allan: Yeah, yeah. To me, and I appreciate, so I pay for professional services all the time. So we've got our accountants and things. We work with people. You work with people, the figure is, granted I'm not being flippant about money, but if it's the right, your architect, you'll know this yourself, they're part of your life for eight or nine months. You have to be able to work with them. It's a very personal thing building your own house. It shouldn't all be cost driven. It certainly shouldn't be anywhere near all cost driven.

But you should, if you're doing comparative exercise on four or five different architects and the ones that are far too cheap aren't doing it right and aren't making a profit or they may not be in business by the time you're going through the project. But the ones that are very expensive well they have to justify it. And as you say it's fine for people to charge what they want, but you have to be able to back it up. You have to be able to deliver a service. And if you're a specialist in the field you have to be able to prove that you are.

And again if you're going for something like Passivhaus for certification you have to accept that there is an additional charge to that.

But I think it's when people are looking at costs or engaging with an architect or a professional, spend a lot of time on it. Speak to their clients. Do your research. There's no excuse I think anymore for a bad purchase. And that goes for anything, whether it's stuff online or a professional service. There's so much information out there and research and learn about people and spend time with them.

On average while I'll have met a client two or three times we'll have been to their site, we'll have spent a couple of hours on the phone and they'll have read our ebook and they'll know about the content that we've got online and they'll be able to trust us. And if you can't

do that when you're about to make a big purchase with somebody then they're probably not the people for you.

Ben: Allan, it's been good to have a chat. Thank you very much for coming onto the podcast.

Allan: It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you.